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SUBJECT: FIRST FEMALE KUWAITI MINISTER RESIGNS

First female minister resigns

¶1. On August 24, Kuwaiti Health Minister Dr. Masouma Al-Mubarak, a liberal and Shi'a women's rights activist, tendered her resignation to the Amir of Kuwait after a deadly fire broke out in one of the government hospitals. As the head of the ministry, Al-Mubarak accepted responsibility for the calamity, which killed two and injured 19, and felt compelled to resign.

¶2. On July 14, 2005, when Al-Mubarak (of the minority Shi'a community) was appointed as the Minister of Planning and State Minister for Administrative Development Affairs, she became the first woman in Kuwaiti history to head a ministry.

In July 2006, she was appointed as Minister of Communications and in March 2007 she assumed the troubled portfolio of the Ministry of Health. Three previous Health Ministers had been "grilled" (interrogated on the parliament floor) and forced to resign. (Note: Al-Mubarak's resignation leaves Minister of Education Nooriyah Al Sabih as the only remaining female minister in the Cabinet.)

Press treatment

¶3. The resignation of Al-Mubarak was widely reported in the press. Many articles appeared in support of MP Walid Al-Tabtabaie, a leading Salafi parliamentarian known for his attacks against Al-Mubarak and his zeal in previous grillings. In an August 12 interview, he announced his intention to proceed with the grilling of Al-Mubarak. Previously, in response to numerous grilling threats, Al-Mubarak had said that she was ready to give an account of her time as Health Minister. Other articles were written in support of her and suggested that she was being drummed out of office because of her stance against corruption and favoritism in health care provisions and notably because she refused to pander to the 'wasta' (or nepotistic) demands of prominent MPs. The Health Ministry's Foreign Medical Treatment Program, which determines which Kuwaiti applicants qualify for all-expense-paid medical treatment in the U.S. and Europe is notorious for being fraught with corruption.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Dr. Al-Mubarak made a name for herself by taking a public stand against favoritism. She earned her reputation as a competent and technocratic minister during her stints in the Planning and Communication Ministries. Unfortunately, the five months that she had in the Health Ministry were not enough to bring about the necessary reforms needed in the beleaguered sector and the outbreak of the hospital fire prompted her resignation before her opponents could demand it in Parliament. It is noteworthy that Dr. Masouma was appointed Health Minister shortly after the beginning of a bird flu outbreak in Kuwait. She led the ministry's effective and encouragingly transparent response

in containing the outbreak and allaying public concerns. As Minister of Communications, her personal involvement allowed Post to finally resolve a long-standing multi-million dollar dispute between the MOC and AT&T. She also spearheaded efforts to sign an open skies agreement with the U.S. End Comment.

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